

ON THE
LAUNCHING PAD:

Health Homes

by Kevin P. Henry

Promoting Wellness and Providing Comprehensive, Coordinated Care

Whether a patient is concentrating on weight loss, exercise and other preventive care—or attending to an unforeseen medical condition—a strong support system is essential to ensure good outcomes. But navigating the health system is daunting, even for those fortunate enough to have strong family support, knowledge of the health care system and medical insurance. That is just one reason all Washingtonians could benefit from a **Health Home**—and increase the value they receive from a complicated health system.

“Value in health services, one of the key action areas for making Washington the Healthiest State in the Nation, is about more than cutting costs,” says **Washington Health Foundation (WHF)** CEO **Greg Vigdor**. “It is about every Washingtonian being a good consumer of health care, by giving them the tools and support they need.”

The Health Home concept is currently under development by WHF staff and includes pilot programs in Seattle and King County. The WHF definition of Health Home has grown from the “Medical Home” model for children with special needs, created by the **American Academy of Pediatrics**. While the Medical Home concept lays a strong foundation for improved health, WHF’s

Health Home definition takes it one step further—creating a comprehensive system of support that will increase value of health services. By working with key purchasers of health care such as state and local governments and businesses, WHF is helping others incorporate this thinking into their purchasing strategies.

Health Homes acknowledge that health care is more than just medical—Health Homes include holistic, individualized approaches to wellness.

WHF defines a Health Home as an accessible, consistent support system that maximizes an individual’s health. Health Homes benefit every Washingtonian, even those without an acute diagnosis, chronic condition or any health concerns. A Health Home is about prevention, not just treatment; and it deals with all aspects of health, including physical, dental and emotional. A Health Home is sensitive to cultural and language issues and barriers. A Health Home should promote comprehensive, coordinated and tailored care throughout one’s lifespan through an ongoing relationship with a trusted source of individualized health information and planning, advice and social support.

A Health Home has the opportunity to make a big difference in care and medical outcomes, even for small children. Take for example, the story of eight-year-old **Nicole Howard**.

In 2002, Nicole was diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia, a very rare form of cancer in children. Complicating matters was Nicole’s mixed-race heritage—half-Caucasian and half-Japanese—which made it

difficult to find a match for a needed bone marrow transplant. Thanks to a new drug she is taking, the cancer is currently in remission. However, to ensure her continued health, Nicole will still require a transplant when a donor is found.

Although Nicole has health insurance and a very supportive family, her mother recalls the emotional toll her illness took on the entire family. In a Health Home, counseling for those coping with illness is a component of overall wellness.

Fortunately for the Howard family, counseling was available and helped them all sustain emotional wellness through a very difficult period.

“If it weren’t for the counseling I don’t know what I would have done,” says Nicole’s mom. “It also helped her brother to understand and cope with his sister’s illness.”

In similar situations, a Health Home care coordinator would be a central resource for health and wellness information, advising on health decisions and synchronizing all care. One of the major differences between a Medical Home and a Health Home is that the latter allows for the possibility that the trusted health “coach,” “chairperson” or “care coordinator” is not necessarily a physician. The care coordinator could arrange counseling, coordinate doctor’s visits and medications, and even set up child care for siblings. Instruction and follow-up would be provided to ensure medications are being taken properly.

In Nicole’s situation, although the cancer is in remission, the stress of waiting to find a marrow transplant is still present.

A Health Home care coordinator could be an important support person during this process.

“We believe this part of our Health Home definition would mean fewer costs and more value to the system in the long run, because people would be healthier and the trusted care coordinator could be less expensive than a physician in terms of compensation for non-clinical services,” says **Penny Reid**, WHF Director of Health Home Development.

Vigdor agrees, saying while the care coordinator does not need to be a physician, that position should require some medical training and background. This could be a family member; however, in some situations a relative or family friend has taken this role and, due to lack of knowledge, has given the wrong advice, resulting in negative health consequences. A knowledgeable care coordinator would assure all treatments are coordinated with a medical provider, and are explained in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way.

Implementing the Health Home model will substantially increase the value of services. Patients will receive appropriate advice from the care coordinator before venturing into the health system where costs and emotional stress can increase. While a patient will still receive an array of services to improve health, a care coordinator will help ensure better long-term maintenance and a healthier lifestyle. Consumers will also value health care more when they are connected to a Health Home, as navigating the health system will become easier.

To begin creating your own Health Home, identify your personal health provider, tell that provider your personal wellness plan, and collect your family's health records in a central location.

MORE RESOURCES

- <http://www.whf.org/hs/chap.asp>
Washington residents who live in King County can contact the WHF's Community Health Access Program (CHAP) for assistance in creating a Health Home: (206) 284-0331.
- www.hmhbwa.org
Those living outside King County can contact Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies for connections to local assistance: (800) 322-2588.

this is how we do it...

Creating a Health Home for your family is one way you can help make Washington the Healthiest State in Nation!

